SPENCER FULLERTON WEAVER, JR.

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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(1911 -)

Spence Weaver, one of Hawaii's best-known restauranteurs, tells of his early childhood, including his residence in New York City, which strongly influenced his choice of careers. Subsequent to his East Coast education and prior to World War II, he trained as a Naval pilot.

Mr. Weaver's assignment to Hawaii induced him to move here permanently. He recounts the growth of the Spencecliff chain of restaurants from its origin of six Swanky Franky hot dog and hamburger carts, along with the changes he has observed in the restaurant business and the tourism industry over the past fifty years.

His enthusiasm for and continuing interest in Tahiti as a tourist destination are described. He recalls his first visit to Tahiti, the round-about route to Tahiti in those days and the difficulties encountered in building and staffing Hotel Tahiti.

INTERVIEW WITH SPENCER FULLERTON WEAVER, JR.

At his Diamond Head home, 3202 Noela Drive, Honolulu, Hawaii

September 24, 1986

W: Spence Weaver

S: Alice Sinesky, Interviewer

S: As I recall, you were born on the East Coast.

W: I was born at 3 East 85th in metropolitan New York City. In Manhattan. At Christmas one year--I was nine and a half--I had an appendicitis operation and afterwards the doctors thought a trip to Florida would be good, so my father took me down to Miami. My father had some architectural work down there. I went to one prep school in Lakewood, New Jersey, and didn't last long.

After that I went to Stuyvesant School in Warrenton, Virginia, and I was homesick. (laughs) I went to quite a few prep schools, which isn't important. I went to Choate and then Westminster from which I graduated in Simsbury, Connecticut. That's a preparatory school--mostly for Yale. Unfortunately, I was sort of a playboy. I graduated in 1935 with a B.S., which was a Bachelor of Science. I took what was as close to a business course as you could at Yale. You couldn't take business courses unless you went to Harvard and took advanced, and I didn't want to go to school that badly.

I was in the Army ROTC at Yale. After I got my second lieutenant's commission and took my two weeks, I'd already taken my exam for the Navy as an aviation cadet. As soon as I had my two weeks done with, I resigned from the Army Field Artillery Reserve and reported to Floyd Bennett Field on Long Island for elimination flight training. I didn't get eliminated (laughs) so I went on to Pensacola. That was in 1935.

S: Had you done any flying before that? What made you decide that you wanted to go into that?

W: I really thought that aviation was the coming thing. My father had designed the Waldorf Astoria, the Hotel Pierre, Hotel Lexington, most of the Biltmores in the country and Cuba, the Breakers in Palm Beach, the Boca Rotan club and

many others, including the Jonathan Club in Los Angeles. His firm was Schutz and Weaver. They were located in New York City. They were the largest hotel architects in the world during the twenties. The Waldorf was their last project before the crash and the Depression. My father always told me, "I can always hire an architect."

I think aviation was my idea. I wanted to become a pilot and then when I got out of the Navy, if I didn't get washed out, I was going to go into commercial aviation, but not as a pilot. I was going to handle administration or something of that sort, but I wanted the piloting background.

After graduating from Pensacola in 1936, the Navy had big flying boats--they were twin engine--and they sent me to Ford Island, Pearl Harbor. About a year later we went back to San Diego and got new aircraft and flew the biggest formation at that time out to Honolulu. Eighteen planes and it took us about eighteen hours.

I skipped something. When I was about seventeen in January of 1929, my father took my brother and myself out of school and took us around the world. We went first to London and we flew the Channel. That was something in those days.

From Paris we took a train down south and had a chauffeur-driven car to take us from Nice to Italy where we picked up this round the world cruise ship, the Cunard Line's Franconia.

On the way around the world, besides going to China and a lot of interesting places, we were able to stop in Honolulu where my father learned that he had gotten the award for the Waldorf Astoria. That was good news.

The people who owned the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, which was only two or three years old at that time, wanted to enlarge it. My father's partner had been with Warren and Whitmore, and he was the project architect for the Royal Hawaiian, so they asked my father if he would consider enlarging it. We stayed there for a couple of days.

I spent most of my time on a surfboard with a big, good-looking Hawaiian guy giving me a push so I could catch the wave. I swam in school. In fact, I was on the water polo team at Yale and on the varsity for three years. Surfing came to me naturally. When I was lucky enough to get sent back here in 1936 with the Navy, the first thing I did was join the Outrigger Canoe Club and started surfing.

S: On this round-the-world trip, you say your father took you and your brother. Was Clifton your only brother? Did you have any sisters?

W: Later on I did when my father remarried.

S: But your mother didn't go on this trip?

W: My father and mother were divorced. They both came from Philadelphia and moved to New York in time to make me a New Yorker. My mother died of cancer in 1930.

S: Were you impressed with Honolulu on your first trip? Did you enjoy the climate or see a lot of potential here?

W: I wasn't thinking of business at that time. I just enjoyed the surfing. In fact, I liked it enough to pick up and move out with my new wife, which I did after my four years in the Navy. I went into the Navy for four years and I got out in 1939 in the fall.

Before that, I was sent back towards the end of my four years to be an instructor at Floyd Bennett Field and I was married. My father had died, and I had about six more months and my four years were up, at which time I made my mind up to pack up bag and baggage and move to Hawaii.

In those days it was a long trip across the country. I drove and then came by ship. I was lucky both times. The Navy sent me over on the Lurline and then when I came over with my wife, we took the Lurline. We were rather remote in those days in Hawaii. Everything was six months behind the mainland. Now it's different.

S: When you made up your mind to come to Hawaii...

W: I didn't care what I did.

S: I was going to ask if you had any idea.

W: I was disillusioned with Pan Am as far as staying in the Navy. I decided to go to Honolulu and take any job I could get. I went to work for a friend of mine named Clark Reynolds who's still around. Sometimes we call him "Smiley." (laughs) But he did smile the other day. I saw him. It so happened that the real estate business was dead. There wasn't any action.

During the time I was an instructor at Floyd Bennett I saw these little carts selling hot dogs and hamburgers called Swanky Franky's. I ordered six of those--manufactured, custom built--and when they got here I picked up the old drive-in on John Ena Road that was boarded up, and remodelled it as a mother ship for these little carts when they arrived.

Because they arrived and caught everybody's fancy, somebody offered me a coffee shop downtown in the Home Insurance Building on King Street, where the Bank of Hawaii is today. We remodelled it into The Patio. [115 South King] The Army was just about to open Hickam and they asked me if I wanted to run the post exchange, the restaurant and the beer garden. I did, and the Navy asked us to run the civilian messhalls for the defense workers from the mainland.

In the meantime I built a permanent Swanky Franky's stand at the corner of Bishop and Hotel Street and another one on the miniature golf course out in Waikiki across from the old Moana. Then we took over Deans, [2517 Kalakaua Avenue] which had been condemned. It was built on stilts out over the water on the beach about where the Hyatt Regency is located, but this was on the water. I bought a bakery, Silva's Bakery, in Kapuhulu and transformed it into a Snowflake and enlarged it. In about a year and nine months after I got out of the service I was up to my ears in restaurants and bakery and...

S: (laughs) ...hot dog stands.

W: As a matter of fact, about that time Art Rutledge threatened to picket me if I didn't organize the beer garden at Hickam. He was going to picket my Patio downtown. I told him to go ahead, but he never did.

We had adopted a policy all these years, until I sold out, to give ...(interrupted by telephone call) The policy was to try and treat the employees better and give them better conditions and fringe benefits than the union. That succeeded very well and we never were organized although they did try it several times.

S: Were you one of the few places then that wasn't organized?

W: No restaurants at that time were organized in Honolulu.

S: Because the unions didn't really come in until after World War II?

W: I told you just now that in 1940 he tried to organize me.

S: Yes, but I thought that it was after World War II that the unions grew in strength.

W: So did everything else.

I was a Naval Reserve Officer so I was called back on duty on the first of July, 1941. I was out at Pearl Harbor on the seventh of December.

S: Tell me about that.

W: No. That's well documented already.

S: Well, a lot of times I ask people about their personal reactions, what they were doing, how they felt about it. Most people, of course, were convinced that it was a practice. It took a long time for them to believe that it was the real thing.

W: You're quite right. That morning I should have been officer of the day in Pearl Harbor at Ford Island Air Station. I think we called it the Fleet Air Base then. I had swapped duty at that time because my wife was coming in on the Lurline that Wednesday. I was staying at Bob Topping's old home on Nahua Place in Waikiki. I was lying by the pool when the houseboy came out with my orange juice and said that my wife wanted me to come in and listen to the radio.

I went in and the newscaster said, "Pearl Harbor is under attack by aircraft believed to be Japanese." I said, "Another damn drill." Well, I decided to eat my breakfast anyway. I put my uniform on and ate my breakfast. In those days the Royal Hawaiian Nursery was right behind me and all of a sudden a piece of shrapnel went into the trees. At that point I began to think maybe it was something. I figured this way; if it was a drill, I was going to have my breakfast and if it was the real thing, I'd better have my breakfast. It might be my last one.

I called one of my defense canteen workers out there right next to Hickam. I called--CHA3 was the name of the area. They said, "Oh, it's very scary. It's all smoke and noise, but we're carrying on." I said, "Good." I jumped in my Cadillac car and had to drive out. Everybody in uniform was being waved out at seventy or eighty miles an hour to Pearl Harbor. I had turned and driven right along under all the fuel oil tanks and it scared me. They were a sure target.

Then I got in a small boat. I had stopped my car away from the other cars and the shore blew up on the dry dock. I got in a little boat and we had to go under the stern of the Nevada, which was in the middle of the stream and was under attack. We thought if the magazines blow up, we were all going with it. We got to Ford Island and got dumped off on the apron of my old squadron.

Planes were all burning and it was a mess. The only thing I thought of was that I should go to the administration building and see if the guy who took my place was all right. He was alive, so I went back to the barracks and all these

wounded men, oil-drenched sailors were being pulled out of the water, were being laid all around the lanais of the barracks. The water main from Pearl Harbor was broken by bombs so there was no water. I had been ship's service officer at one time, so I knew where the beer was. I opened up all the beer and passed it around. We couldn't get anything else to drink.

I started to say that when I was called back in July of 1941 and this was December 7, I had another four years--a little more than four years--in the Navy.

S: Were you here in Hawaii or the Pacific most of that time?

W: I had a year at Midway as operations officer. I'll tell you, gooney birds are fine to look at for a little while, but you get awfully tired of them. (laughs)

S: A year of them would be a bit much.

W: Then I came back and I had a transport squadron--the first squadron to use what is now Honolulu International Airport. It was then the Honolulu Naval Air Station. We dragged quonset huts up on skids and had a tower. That's all there was. We had five DC-3s, three Lockheed Lodestars which were called R4Ds and quite a few smaller aircraft like the Cessnas and Beechcraft--utility planes.

I thought that was great. I lived on Diamond Head Circle about two houses away from where I am now, so I made the mistake of writing a letter asking not to be relieved--not to be given rotation back to the mainland. The minute I wrote the letter I got dispatch orders--invasion orders to the Carolines as flag pilot to the admiral. I ended up out there, and then afterwards I went to Guam for reassignment and they assigned me as chief of staff to the commander naval air bases, Saipan, which job I thought was pretty good. I liked it.

Then out of a clear blue sky I got orders to the mainland--to the East Coast. I didn't want to go to the East Coast. I had lived there before. I wanted the West Coast. I went down and reported at Norfolk and they sent me as prospective commanding officer to Oceana, which was right next to Virginia Beach. This was in June and VE day occurred while I was in New York and on my way down to Norfolk. We had a summer estate at Easthampton, Long Island, so I could spend my weekends flying down there. Always on Monday it was foggy, so I couldn't come back until about Tuesday. (laughter)

S: You kept your businesses here in Hawaii during the war?

W: Yes. My manager of the bakery, my office manager, was a partner in the bakeries because I couldn't have any interest in any business that was selling to the military. The bakery was selling to the Army and Air Force. After the war we wanted to incorporate it and he said, "That will leave me a minority and I want to run it." I said, "You can't run it." He had the option to buy us out or we had the option to buy him out, and he exercised his option.

In the meantime I'd gotten divorced. Number one.

S: So you were still on the East Coast when the war ended.

W: Yes, I spent two months at Easthampton. The name of our estate in Easthampton--a big home up on the hill... The front lawn was really a polo field, but after my father had a bad spill he converted it into a three-hole golf course. But because it was up on a hill and my name was Spencer and my brother's name was Clifton, my father decided to call it Spencecliff. That's where the name came from. Later we called it Spencecliff Enterprises and later when we incorporated after the war, we named it Spencecliff Corporation as a holding company, but all the restaurants were called by different names. In those days it was too small a town to have two or three similar restaurants.

S: When did your brother come over here?

W: He came over on a vacation from VMI [Virginia Military Institute] in 1940. He decided to stay and not go back to VMI, so I asked him to join me and he did. He spent most of his time fishing and he was a great diver. He was president of the Hawaii Malacological Society and had a tremendous collection of shells. He's written a book on them. He had a stroke about fifteen years ago. He lives in Lanikai, but his stroke has left him partially paralyzed.

S: And he's how many years younger than you?

W: Five.

S: Okay. So you spent some time at Easthampton and the war was over and you came back here.

W: I came back here and the first thing I did was grab the airport. It was still under the Navy, but somebody said that the restaurant was in excess of the Navy's war needs, so we got the old coffee shop to start with. Later we enlarged it and called it the Sky Room and that was the main feeding operation for the terminal until the new terminal that's there today was built. We also had Inter-Island coffee shop on the other side which was down where the present terminal

is now. We took over Hickam field again--the MATS (Military Air Transport Command) terminal.

Then we built Kelly's and along came Queen's Surf. I signed a contract in 1949 for Queen's Surf and leased it and we had that, too, until my "friend" Frank Fasi decided to bulldoze it. That was a god damn crime. Sorry to swear, but the building was originally the Case Deering estate, which was bought by Chris Holmes.

Chris Holmes who had Coconut Island in Kaneohe Bay. Chris married Mona Hind from the Big Island. She had two children by her former marriage to Charlie Lucas.

They had this Seth Parker, a three-masted sailing ship, there, and I remember going to parties and Chris and Chris' son and Mona's son and daughter, Charlie Boy and Lambie, were there. Those were the great old days. Getting back to Queen's Surf. Chris gave it up to the Navy during the war and it was used as a rest home for, I think, aviators and submariners.

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was coming over here, it was taken over for his residence and it happened that there was an elevator in the building going to the penthouse that Chris Holmes had built. Originally, it was the Case Deering home. When Chris got it, he added the penthouse and the elevator and so forth. Because it had the elevator, President Roosevelt could get upstairs. The penthouse was where Mona and Chris used to live. That was where President Roosevelt met with Admiral Nimitz, General Douglas MacArthur, and Admiral Hoover [1944] and they determined the rest of the war's strategy at that meeting. It was really an historical meeting and the building itself was over fifty years old. That made it a historical building, too, and yet, as I said, Fasi chose to kill something that was utilized as a recreational area for the people of Hawaii. Especially Oahu.

And it was not on the beach. The beach was man made. It was only up to the seawall. Beyond the seawall was the sand and that only came later after I had it when we started putting beaches in with retaining groins. Starting with the Outrigger and the Colony Surf--they built their own. Then they built one in front of the Natatorium and Queen's Surf. Some of it washed down to Kelley's hotel, which gave him a beach, and Halekulani, which they didn't have before. They had to put more sand in, but everybody was happy. I've seen the sand in front of the Royal disappear entirely. The ocean came right up to the seawall. It does disappear and come back.

S: On what grounds did Fasi demolish this? Was it a hazard?

W: No, no. It was a vendetta against me personally. His excuse was that he wanted a clear view of the ocean. He wanted a clear sweep of the ocean from Kalakaua Avenue. He wanted to take not only Kodak, which was ridiculous, but he wanted to move the Aquarium. He only succeeded in ruining my place. I was running it. It was owned by the city.

It was a poor man's Outrigger Canoe Club. It served as a beautiful place to have lunch or dinner. You could come in off the beach and go the snack bar or the beach bar for refreshments.

S: And there were a lot of entertainers there, weren't there?

W: Yes, I had about 268 employees altogether. We had the Barefoot Bar on the second floor where Richard Kauhi started. Later Sterling Mossman and his group that became very famous. In the meantime, we had the dining room that after dinner was converted to a nightclub and Kui Lee became famous there with "I'll Remember You" and such songs. That was the only place he played because he had cancer and ultimately had to quit.

In the garden we had luaus for the tourists twice a week. There was also a smaller place where we had entertainment nightly. Elaine Frisbie and Don Over. It was taken over later by Tavana. We had that going every night, the Barefoot Bar every night, the dining room was going every night. Dinner was being served at $2.75 for roast beef. Family dinners. Luaus twice a week. Everybody was happy except Fasi. I don't want to dwell on that too much.

S: After the demise of the Queen's Surf, you still had considerable properties.

W: I kept acquiring new ones. I moved over to Maui and leased the Lahaina Broiler and the Pioneer Inn. We enlarged the Lahaina Broiler. Hal Whitaker was the architect. And I took Hal down to Tahiti, too, which will come later.

S: The Pioneer Inn was there as a restaurant and hotel?

W: Yes, but only the original building was there. A group came to me and asked me if I would take over the hotel part, including the restaurant and bar, and they would take the whole block and make a new L-shaped wing as an addition to the old one, and that would have thirty-six rooms upstairs. Downstairs would be shops and they would put in a pool and a gazebo. I signed an agreement that I would lease it if they got the financing and development.

S: What else was going on here on Oahu about the same time?

W: What happened at that time here on Oahu was that we were looking for places to take over to make up for the lost places and I guess we had fifty places that we don't have now (or didn't have when I sold out). I took over the Ranch House; I took over the Yacht Harbor restaurant and then I built this beautiful little coffee shop called Tops of Waikiki. I made an agreement to let them tear it down and I have a forty-five year lease on this building called Canterbury, which was a bad move, but you lose some and win some.

We also took over the Merry Monarch on [298] Beachwalk and built that as Tops Beachwalk. Then Mike's Grog 'n Sirloin on Beachwalk, which was very successful. I sold that property, fifty percent, to a Japanese group and we opened the New Tokyo Restaurant and the Hula Hut. Later, I sold out my interest. Then we went across the street and took over next to Peter Canlis' place and turned it into the South Seas Village and Popo's Mexican Food. We tried to keep pace. As we'd lose something, we'd try to take something else.

S: Well, as you said, you win some and lose some, but you didn't have too many real losers.

W: I did have some.

S: But you won more than you lost.

W: The biggest mistake I made was letting them tear down Tops Waikiki. They wanted to get a high-rise moratorium and the high-rise moratorium went into effect. Had I known what was going to happen later. The special design district wouldn't have allowed you to build within thirty feet of the sidewalk and that's on a corner and they couldn't have built the building. Another reason that I did it was that they leased the land when my lease expired and I figured I didn't have much future. If I had known what the special design district was going to do to them, they couldn't have built the building. Whether they had the lease or not, wouldn't have mattered. I would have had my Tops. That was a beautiful building. It was built to last fifty years or more.

S: As a rule you didn't go for the fancy, high-priced restaurants. You stuck more to the middle of the road.

W: Well, we had The Gourmet, the first French restaurant, and it had very elegant service and beautiful food in the Royal block, which was torn down to make room for the arcades that are there now. That one, unfortunately, I built at the same time that Peter Canlis opened his. I was locked in in a

situation that turned out badly. We made money and we had the first live music disco. It was fun. I can't remember all the places.

S: What became of The Gourmet?

W: It turned into the Waikiki Beef and Grog because I built it right in front of the Royal, but the people who stayed at the Royal didn't mind paying the money for a cab to go down to Canlis.

Fisherman's Wharf--I shouldn't forget that. And Tahitian Lanai. That was right on the water. Duke Kahanamoku Lagoon. Fisherman's Wharf I got back in the 1950s. That's been a goldmine. So has the Lahaina Broiler. We recently bought Blackbeard's in Lahaina and changed that into Fisherman's Wharf Lahaina.

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S: I know that one of your prime interests is Tahiti and what you've done there. Would you like to talk a little bit about that? When did you first visit there and what about the place intrigued you?

W: Kingie Kimball (he was at the roast they had for me in July) organized an invitational Gentlemen's Safari to Tahiti at $1,000 apiece for about a week. He and Clark Reynolds and some other fellows organized it and invited me and Henry Buscher and Bill Quinn and Ernie Kai, the attorney, and quite a lot of people.

S: You say this was a Gentlemen's Safari. This means no wives.

W: Yes. To Tahiti in those days! It would have been foolish. Maybe Bill Quinn came later because I know Nancy was with him. It may not have been on that trip. Anyway, I accepted, although I didn't think my wife was going to let me. (My second wife at that time.) But she was very pleased to have me go and, of course, I was more than pleased to go.

We didn't know a damn thing about the aircraft that we were going to fly on. There were no fields in Tahiti. We had to land in Bora Bora at the old Army field. They fixed it up and put some temporary portable range finders in. This plane showed up and it was an old DC-4. Viking Airlines. We found out later they only had one plane. The stewardess looked like Marilyn Monroe.

We went by way of Canton Island and landed in Bora Bora overnight. We were met in Bora Bora by this old flying boat --Sir Gordon Taylor had taken a group of people from Australia to Tahiti. He was available, so we arranged to

have him fly up. The flying boat couldn't take more than twenty-five people at a time and there were about forty of us, so he made two trips. Also, the Tevega was in port in case the flying boat broke down or had trouble. The Tevega was a beautiful yacht owned by Crane, the plumbing man.

Anyway to get down to Tahiti, Henry and I went on the first flight. We had asked George Brangier for information on where to stay and he told us. We stayed there for four days and four nights and I won't tell you all about what went on for those four days, but we had a hell of a lot of fun.

Tahiti struck me right off the bat as being what Hawaii must have been like seventy-five or even a hundred years earlier. This was in 1956. I made up my mind already to go back. We left by way of Bora Bora one night. Then another night we spent in Pago Pago and then on up and back. It was a memorable trip. We never thought the plane was going to get off the ground when it was taking off, but that's another story.

I returned in October with my brother Clifton. I think we went down on the Mariposa or the Monterey. That went straight down from Honolulu. When that stopped, the only other way was to go to Fiji and take the flying boat from Fiji. We landed at Nandi and went over to Suva. The boat would leave at nine in the morning and go to Apia, West Samoa, where you'd spend part of the night, then leave at two a.m. for Aitutaki for refueling, and then take off again about eight or nine o'clock for Tahiti, which was about 500 miles away (three hours).

At that point they'd start to say, "Compliments of the captain. Have a drink." That would go on for an hour or so and then they'd start serving lunch. It was such a big aircraft that the galley was almost as big as this office. (approximately twenty feet by fifteen feet) It probably was. They cooked everything on board. The food was also very good besides the liquor. Then they had about three kinds of wine. After that they had cordials. By the time you landed in the harbor at Papeete, you were pretty well...

S: Relaxed. (laughs)

W: I was going to say loaded. I tried to get hotel property fee simple and had two fall through. The last one, which is what I have now, Hotel Tahiti is a mile out of town on the way to the airport. The airport is four miles out of town. When I first went there, of course, the airport wasn't built. We opened the hotel in 1960. In 1959 we started to fill in two and a half acres. We have five acres between the road and the lagoon and five acres behind us for parking and storage.

The hotel itself was built in increments. It now has five two-story buildings with eighty-eight rooms and verandahs or lanais. Nine double bungalows gave us eighteen bungalow suites. The main buildings are about 25,000 square feet in size. They house the dining room, the lobby, the entrance, the gift shop, the hotel reception desk and the offices for the hotel.

We have had, on occasion, 3,000 people in there for the election of Miss Tahiti. I had to present the awards one year at three in the morning. They had eighteen contestants. There were five ramps; one in the dining room, one in the cocktail lounge, and three outside. Now we've enlarged the place, so that they wouldn't have to sit outside.

When they have something like that, we can feed about 750 in the dining room for a full course meal. Another 300 for the buffet in the lagoon front dining room. Other ones will come to see the show, listen to the music and dancing and watch the pageant. It happens quite a lot. There's a Miss Motorcross, a Miss Motorboat, a Miss Chinatown. Every month, there's something.

S: When you first got the idea of building this hotel in Tahiti, did you hire an architect from Honolulu to do this or how did you go about that?

W: I knew that we had no architects in Honolulu who would know how to build a Tahitian house, but on the bungalows there's an elongated oval shape, so what we did was have Pete Wimberly of Wimberly, Allison, Tong, and Goo, take the plot plan of the layout and spot the buildings on it. He designed the two-story buildings. Of course, the Tahitians didn't follow his specifications. If it called for copper pipes, they'd put iron. If it called for redwood, they'd put pine. It was just one of those things.

On the main Tahitian style buildings he just drew the outlines and they built those their natural way of doing it. The kitchen was built out of rock and iron with a cement roof. A corrugated transite cement roof. But kitchens are the worst things for fires down there. I've seen five of them burn down.

We haven't gone out to the other islands. Trying to run one hotel is enough of a problem. Tahiti is a strange place. You can send someone down there to train the employees in the dining room and the cocktail lounge--they can be Tahitians themselves. I sent one girl from the Tahitian Lanai down for three months to train the employees. The minute she left, they went back to their old ways. It's really difficult. You just can't bring people from Honolulu or the mainland. They have to be French. And if you bring Frenchmen over, you have to send them back to France if they're no good. You

can't fire them without a reason and if you haven't got a reason, they'll sue you. I learned a lot.

About my children. My second wife, June Lewis, and I have a son Spencer Weaver III. He worked for the company for a while and just recently went to Colorado to finish his college. He only took two years and that's the only one that will give him credit for those two years so he went back. He wants to take a law course. He's thirty-four.

Then because I went to Tahiti I married a French Tahitian girl I met down there, after I divorced my son's mother. My two daughters are by my French-Tahitian wife. Emily is a senior at Chaminade. She's twenty-one. Moearii is married for the second time and is twenty-five and has two little children.

S: And living here?

W: My wife runs the hotel and lives in Tahiti, and Moearii is there part of the time. My wife will come up here for two or three weeks and come up for Christmas. She just latched on to this beautiful little baby gal (my granddaughter by Moearri) and that was the end. She'll be three this Saturday.

S: They're beautiful at that age.

W: This one is especially. She has those huge eyes. She looks like she was made by Margaret Keane.

I thought my daughter who is at Chaminade would go down to Tahiti to run the hotel, but I don't know if she'll go or not. If I can, I think I'll sell it; if I get enough money.

S: How often do you go back and forth to Tahiti now?

W: If I go twice a year, that's pretty good. When South Pacific Islands Airways was grounded, I didn't go down for nine months. I was invited to go down on that inaugural flight by George Wray, the owner. That grounding was unfair to them because it gave Hawaiian Airlines a chance to go to Samoa, and UTA started flying from Tahiti, but I think George will get enough business to keep him alive.

S: That was thirty years ago when you first went to Tahiti. Have you seen a lot of growth in tourism there? A lot of changes?

W: It hasn't been so much growth in tourism per se as it's been a growth in the economy. Most of it was due to the French tests at Mururoa atoll, which is to the east about 500 miles. With the trouble in New Caledonia, a lot of French people have moved in, so the main town of Papeete has grown

tremendously and has gotten modernized. It has wide boulevards. They even have a freeway that goes for about five miles.

S: In talking to people here, they say that they love to go to Tahiti to vacation because it's like Hawaii was fifty years ago.

W: Yes. When I was there thirty years ago, it was like Hawaii was a hundred years ago. Now it's cut down to about half. Traffic in the town is terrible, but once you're outside it's not bad. A lot of them are crazy drivers.

S: Do you have to speak French to get along there?

W: No, you don't. It depends on what area. As a tourist, you don't have to speak French. There are quite a few people who speak English. I have to talk sort of a pidgin French to get across to some people who don't speak English. (laughs) There are a few who just speak Tahitian. Especially on the outer islands and the atolls. Most people there speak French. And quite a few speak English, too.

Pan American stopped flying there because the planes were too big; not too big to land, but they carry too many passengers. They can't get enough of a load factor. Continental Airlines is just going to start flying in from Los Angeles and maybe San Francisco. Air France, for instance, which has never gone beyond Los Angeles, will start going there, too, along with the French Airline UTA. Tourism should show a sharp increase in 1987.

S: You've seen a lot of changes in the number of years that you've been in Hawaii.

W: A lot of mistakes, too. Neal Blaisdell tried to get them to adopt a plan of realignment of Kalakaua Avenue that was turned down. Things like that just kill me. The smart thing to do and now it's too late. There haven't been any controls set up. Especially in Waikiki. We know that. Kona and Waikiki are the two shining examples of how not to do a development.

S: What do you think about some of the newer resorts that are going up?

W: Mauna Lani, Mauna Kea, Kaanapali. I think they're beautiful for the wealthier tourists who go there. Kaanapali, of course, has everything. It's not just high-priced. It has medium-range as well. And, of course, there are other places besides Kaanapali. There's Kapalua. Most of it is controlled.

S: There are beautiful resorts, but as you say, so many of them are designed and aimed for the wealthier traveller.

W: That's the trouble with Waikiki today. We're getting the hot dog and peanuts and beer crowd that stay in the cheaper hotels and condominiums. They don't spend their money. We may have five million people this year, but I'd rather have the three million or two and a half that we had ten years ago because they were the wealthier. I just would not recommend to someone to come and stay at Halekulani, for example, and pay that money when they could to to Mauna Lani or Mauna Kea.

S: That seems to be what's happening. The wealthier tourists are heading for the outer island resorts.

W: Now Hemmeter has all these grand ideas about what he should do on Kauai, too, as well as North Kohala.

S: Do you see anything else for Hawaii in the foreseeable future other than tourism, because it seems we're becoming more and more dependent on tourism all the time?

W: I can't see... There'll always be a certain amount of business and agriculture amd aquaculture, but sugar's dead and if they can take its place and do better with other crops, fine. They are trying.

S: If you were coming to Hawaii today as a young fellow, what would you go into? If you were a young fellow, and you felt that there are still opportunities here. Do you see any?

W: There are always opportunities, but I'm not smart enough to think of what they could be.

S: But you came over here without any real game plan.

W: In my days the Big Five had all the business. Unless you married the daughter of one of the Big Five families, you were sort of out in left field. I didn't meet any daughters that I liked, (laughs) so I went into real estate. But banking and insurance were pretty well locked up. Today it's the same thing.

S: But you came over from the mainland without any real plans and you made it all work.

W: Competition then wasn't so tough, I think. I don't know what to advise any youngster. Even my own son. I can't say what he should do. It's very difficult.

S: What are you keeping busy with now?

W: I'm trying to put a deal together right now to take over a restaurant. I'm not at liberty to say which one, but it's not in Waikiki. I think I can make a success with it. It was built and it went to bankruptcy. If you can pick up something cheap enough and run it right, you can end up competing. The original cost to put it together was astounding and they didn't run it right. I think it has a chance. There are a lot of little businesses that could be picked up.

S: But you're just not going to sit back and relax. You have to keep in the business world.

W: Well, I want to have some hobby. I don't play golf and I have a bad ankle, so I can't jog or play tennis. I used to. I can swim.

S: The physical's all well and good, but the mental is just as important.

W: I have Hotel Tahiti, which doesn't require that much. In fact, as I've already said, I'd like to sell that if I can get the right price. If I have one little place to fool with, just to keep my finger in it.

S: I've talked to people a lot older than you and they tell me that, along with the physical, it's important to keep active mentally and get up every day and have some kind of a challenge. Not enough to give you an ulcer, but something to work at.

W: I haven't gotten an ulcer with all the different restaurants I've had so I don't think one will... I could have a hotel or I could have a restaurant for five years as a condition set by purchasers of my company. I'm limited to one restaurant, but I can have other interests besides that.

S: But you prefer the restaurant.

W: Well, I acquired that. I went around the world and lived in the Park Lane in New York City on Park Avenue which is right next to where the Waldorf was built. I got used to eating good food and fine foods. I know what's good and what's bad. I'm not a chef.

S: But you know what people expect from a good restaurant.

W: Yes, and I know what someone shouldn't do.

S: Well, life in Hawaii's been pretty good on the whole.

W: Right. I like where I'm living. Some of these things (indicating furnishings in his office annex) were brought from Easthampton. That sideboard is an English Tudor. That whaling model I bought when I was seventeen. It's an old model of the Mary T. Gardner from Sag Harbor. It was built by the grandfather of the person I bought it from while he was on a five or six year whaling trip. All the fittings are whalebone. Just as a reminder. (laughs) Some of the furniture is from Tahiti.

S: What hobbies have you had over the past years in Hawaii? Did you golf?

W: My father used to make me go out a couple of times, but I never liked it very well. My mother was a national champion tennis player during the 1915-1925 era. She passed away in 1930. I didn't particularly like tennis either, but I was captain of the Davenport College Tennis Team at Yale.

S: You had mentioned the water polo, too. But what did you do for relaxation in Hawaii?

W: Surfed. I body surfed. George Vanderbilt was a friend of mine and when he was over here we'd go to Makupuu and body surf a lot. That was good fun. Walter Macfarlane, who was responsible for building the former Outrigger Canoe Club, was a great friend of mine. Walter Mac and I would body surf.

In those days surfboards were so heavy you couldn't stick a surfboard on top of a Volkswagon--even though they hadn't Volkswagons in those days.

S: Sure, they were up to ninety pounds, weren't they?

W: And twelve or fourteen feet long. I had a big tandem one that was twelve or fourteen feet. You'd put it on your shoulder and go.

S: You never got involved with sailing? You were happy with just the surfing?

W: I'd sail on my surfboard. Not like the ones today. Steer with the fins on your feet.

S: Those were the days when it wasn't as crowded and as hectic as it is now. From what I've heard those were great days. It's terribly crowded now. Traffic's atrocious. Do you sit back and wonder how much more the Island can absorb?

How many more people it can actually support? From the standpoint of jobs, as we had talked about, and resources?

W: Water's important.

S: And five million tourists are going to use a lot of water.

W: The type of tourists that we're getting on Oahu might not take as much as you'd think. Not casting aspersions--just being funny.

S: But it's true in a way. You have so many people coming over on the package deals and when it comes to money spent...

W: You take the old days. When we travelled, we took our valet with us on our around the world cruise. We each had a wardrobe trunk besides the suitcases. Now it's a thing of the past.

S: And you dressed for dinner.

W: Of course. On board ship you had to dress for dinner every damn night.

S: A lot of things have changed.

W: Life styles are changing. I thank you for this interview.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

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THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Watumull Foundation Oral History Project began in June of 1971. During the following seventeen months eighty-eight people were taped. These tapes were transcribed but had not been put in final form when the project was suspended at the end of 1972.

In 1979 the project was reactivated and the long process of proofing, final typing and binding began. On the fortieth anniversary of the Watumull Foundation in 1982 the completed histories were delivered to the three repositories.

As the value of these interviews was realized, it was decided to add to the collection. In November of 1985 Alice Sinesky was engaged to interview and edit thirty-three histories that have been recorded to mark the forty-fifth anniversary of the Foundation.

The subjects for the interviews are chosen from all walks of life and are people who are part of and have contributed to the history of Hawaii.

The final transcripts, on acid-free Permalife bond paper and individually Velo-bound, are deposited and are available to scholars and historians at the Hawaii State Archives, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii and the Cooke Library at Punahou School. The tapes are sealed and are not available.

August 1987